During the spring of 1888, a firestorm of controversy erupted in the pages of the *Atlanta Constitution* regarding Confederate guerilla Tom Polk Edmondson. Charges and countercharges lit up the staid columns of the newspaper for several weeks. According to one bitter North Georgia Unionist, Edmondson had been a “deserter” who led “a set of scamps too cowardly to go where the [real] soldiers were sacrificing their lives.” Edmondson’s men sat out the last year of the war, he asserted, marauding through Whitfield, Gilmer, Pickens, and Murray Counties indiscriminately killing citizens for their valuables.

The young partisan’s defenders - led by one of Edmondson’s sisters and former Rebel cavalry general and United States Congressman “Fighting Joe” Wheeler - attempted to rebut the slander. Edmondson’s men sat out the last year of the war, he asserted, marauding through Whitfield, Gilmer, Pickens, and Murray Counties indiscriminately killing citizens for their valuables.

The young partisan’s defenders - led by one of Edmondson’s sisters and former Rebel cavalry general and United States Congressman “Fighting Joe” Wheeler - attempted to rebut the slander. Edmondson, they contended, had been “brave and generous to a fault, gallant as a knight, and generous to foes.” He had, they asserted, “protected union and confederate families alike” while honorably serving in the Southern army.

The newspaper skirmish revealed, more than anything, how deeply the savage conflict had traumatized the people of North Georgia and how those wounds had festered into raw hatred. Robbery, rape, devastation, arson, torture, and murder were the tactics employed by both sides during the irregular war in the Georgia high country. Historian Sean Michael O’Brien reported: “The war in the mountains bred intense cruelty. It was as if the code that defined moral behavior had been suspended, and all boundaries lifted … [until] ideologies no longer really mattered, only survival and revenge.”

Tom Polk Edmondson, a 21-year-old Rebel cavalry leader, had been thrown into this cauldron of hatred and savagery during the summer of 1864. Throughout the remaining nine months of his life, he would bring a flicker of hope to the dying Confederacy, inspire heroic poetry, and earn the undying animosity of Georgia Unionists.

**Procuri ng a Substitute**

Tom Polk Edmondson was born in August 1844 in Murray County, Georgia. His parents, James and Virginia Rebecca Edmondson, lived in the historic Chief Vann house in Spring Place. They owned three large plantations and more than 60 slaves in Georgia, and another farm in East Tennessee. They raised cotton as their primary cash crop. According to the postwar memoirs of Levi Branham, one of the Edmondson’s slaves, James and “Miss Becky” treated their slaves leniently, and Levi fondly remembered that Tom Polk gave him his first taste of whiskey.

Though only 16 years old at the time, Edmondson was one of the first Murray County citizens to enlist in the Southern service. He joined the Murray Rifles, which mustered into the Confederate Army as Company C, 11th Georgia Infantry, on July 3, 1861, and immediately received orders to report to Virginia. Captain William Luffman, a prominent Murray resident, commanded the unit.

All afire to fight the hated “Lincolnites,” Tom Polk wound up in the worst possible position for a rabid Southern patriot. Alfred R. Waud’s portrait of a Confederate guerilla might be representative of the type of irregular cavalry that served with the North Georgia Scouts.
serving as a clerk at the headquarters of Col. George T. “Tige” Anderson. For a young man yearning for martial glory, compiling lists of uniforms recipients, the number of horse-shoes received, and sick reports must have been a purgatory.

By February 1862, Edmondson had had enough. Luffman sent him back to North Georgia to recruit replacements for the 11th Georgia, but one of the first things he did was secure a substitute. (During the Civil War, soldiers could buy their way out of service by finding somebody to serve in their place, which generally required paying a bounty to the replacement). Though some wealthy Southerners used this loophole and their money to avoid the battlefield, Tom Polk had other plans in mind.

Almost immediately, Tom Polk reenlisted as a lieutenant in the 19th Georgia State Troops, a cavalry unit commanded by Murray Countian Capt. John Oates. The State Troops were one phase of Governor Joe Brown's dream of building an army in Georgia. Despite the sensible plea of Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin that the Confederacy's only hope was “the concentration of the common [military] strength under one head (the national government in Richmond),” Brown persisted in developing and arming state troops. Brown detested the Jefferson Davis administration, labeling the Chief Executive as “dictatorial,...incompetent, and biased against Georgia,” and it certainly did not hurt the governor's massive ego that State Troops might allow him a chance to dictate military policy to President Davis.

Infested with Marauders

The Confederacy quickly took control of Georgia’s state troops, and the various companies were scattered into various Rebel units. Oates's unit became a part of the newly created 3rd Confederate Cavalry. This regiment included the seven Alabama companies of W. N. Estes' battalion, two Georgia units, and one Tennessee company. Since the new regiment included troops from more than one state it received the “Confederate” designation rather than the more traditional state name. It was sworn into service in May of 1862.

Colonel Estes commanded the 3rd Confederate until he was killed at Chattanooga in 1863. Thereafter, the 3rd Confederate received orders to report to “Fighting Joe” Wheeler, who directed a cavalry corps in the Army of Tennessee. For two years the 3rd Confederate fought in numerous skirmishes and battles, moving constantly to meet real or perceived threats.

September of 1862 provides an example of a typical month's duty for the men in Oates's Company (the former 19th Georgia State Troops). On the first day of the month, the company was scouting for Unionist activity along the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad in northern Alabama. A week later, they, along with three other companies from the 3rd Confederate Cavalry, hastened north into the Sequatchie Valley to protect General Braxton Bragg's army at Chattanooga from an attack from the northeast. Proceeding northward through Tennessee, by September 20, the unit had settled in at New Albany, Kentucky. A member of the company noted: “This border is infested with armed bands of marauders [Tories] which we are actively engaged in teaching a good Southern lesson.” The four companies then roamed through southern Kentucky and East Tennessee for nearly a month before rejoining Wheeler's corps.

While the primary duty of the 3rd Confederate involved protecting the infantry from surprise, the horse soldiers also fought in a few major engagements. The unit participated in battles including Stones River, Hoovers Gap (where Col. John Wilder's bluecoats, armed with seven-shot Spencer rifles, routed Estes' company), Wheeler's raid through the Sequatchie Valley and Middle Tennessee (during the siege of Chattanooga), and the opening engagements of the Atlanta Campaign.

In August 1864, General John B. Hood hatched a plan to send Joe Wheeler's horsemen into Middle Tennessee to disrupt the flow of supplies to Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman's army.

Alfred R. Waud sketched this illustration of a cattle raid similar to that engaged in by the North Georgia Scouts to supply General John B. Hood's beleaguered army in early 1865.
Like most of Hood's plans in 1864, this raid turned into an unmitigated disaster. Wheeler's army broke into fragments in the mountains of East Tennessee; the raid did not seriously affect Sherman's ability to wage war; and the raid did not force Sherman to siphon off troops from the army besieging Atlanta. Lewis A. Lawson, in Wheeler's Last Raid, summed up the excursion as "an exercise in futility."

One positive effect of Wheeler's raid was that the Army of Tennessee's cavalry chief left Tom Polk Edmondson and his company in Murray County as they passed through North Georgia. Edmondson, by then a major, apparently had orders to break up the railroad and to protect loyal Southerners in the mountainous area east of Dalton. A member of Edmondson's unit recalled: "The people of this part of Georgia had suffered so much from depredation [by local Tories and Union troops raised in the state's mountainous areas] that they asked Gen. Wheeler to leave our company there [in Murray County] to protect them."

Begged Me to Die

Edmondson quickly set about to restore order in the form of a Confederate presence in the region. He began recruiting men from Murray County and the surrounding area to bolster his unit. One of his first additions was Maurice Thompson, a young Gordon County resident. Thompson had been born in Indiana (or Missouri) in 1844 (or 1846) but raised on his father's plantation near Calhoun. Maurice's father, a Primitive Baptist minister and plantation owner, provided his sons with books and tutors, but "Maurice fell in love with this beautiful and brooding country." He often played hooky with his brother, hunting small game and birds with a longbow.

In 1862, Maurice enlisted in the 63rd Georgia Infantry and spent the next year-and-a-half at Thunderbolt, near Savannah. With the beginning of Sherman's Atlanta Campaign, the 63rd Georgia joined Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's army near Dalton. Thompson saw some action, but his health gave way. Years later he wrote: "I was actually discharged for lung tuberculosis. I had hemorrhages. The doctors begged me to die, but I took a notion to do no such thing." Instead he joined the Edmondson's guerilla band, fighting with the North Georgia Scouts to the end, and then memorializing them post-war.

Tom Polk Edmondson was not the only soldier recruiting from those with pro-Southern sympathies. Edmondson and his Scouts surprised a Unionist detachment near Amicalola Creek, where they killed two Federals and left Capt. Alvin Prince for dead, riddled with six bullets.

Brown managed to enlist 300 men in the First Georgia State Troops Volunteers (usually called the First Georgia Cavalry) by "claiming that President Lincoln had appointed him governor of Federally occupied Georgia." These troops were composed mostly of deserters from Confederate units, and since capture meant death by hanging, they rarely stood long against a determined foe. Professor Robert S. Davis, who has written extensively about the war in the Georgia mountains, reports: "Brown's battalion proved itself almost useless to the federal army."

The presence of the battle-tested North Georgia Scouts soon attracted the attention of the Union commander in Dalton. Major B. D. Fox noted: "There is a man by the name of Edmondson about this country, hanging and killing men and women. He has about seventy-five men with him." Fox clamped to have a company of the First Georgia Cavalry dispatched to Dalton to chase down the North Georgia Scouts, but the home-grown Yankee horsemen again proved ineffective. As a result, the North Georgia Scouts continued to damage the railroad south of Dalton and harass Unionists in the Whitfield County area.

As for "killing women," this charge appears to have been an exaggeration. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the North Georgia Scouts resorted to the same tactics used in the region by other guerilla bands, both Union and Confederate. Orin Loughridge, a Murray resident, testified to the Federal Provost Marshal in Chattanooga about an encounter with Tom Polk's partisans. Again and again Edmondson's men hung Loughridge from the limb of an apple tree, demanding information on Union troop movements. When it became apparent that he didn't know anything, they hung him again, demanding money.

"While four of the men were hanging me the rest were plundering my house," Loughridge recalled. After warning him to "leave the Confederacy, the partisans finally left with twenty horses and mules.

While conduct like this shocks modern sensibilities, Conway Gregory, Jr. summarized the results of Edmondson's tactics: "He carried out raids against the Union Army, and employed tactics of harassment...against citizens sympathetic to the Union cause. His guerilla type operations proved to be highly successful."

Utterly Worthless

In early November 1864, the North Georgia Scouts scored a major triumph over Brown's First Georgia Cavalry. The Unionists, led by Lt. Col. Ashworth, cut a wide swath through Gilmer and Dawson Counties, stealing horses and supplies from those with pro-Southern sympathies. Edmondson and his Scouts surprised a Unionist detachment near Amicalola Creek, where they killed two Federals and left Capt. Alvin Prince for dead, riddled with six bullets.

Three days later, Edmondson's men surprised Ashworth's
main body near Bucktown in Gilmer County. The First Georgia (USA) had taken refuge in a cabin during a snowstorm but failed to post sentries. The Federals were eating breakfast and warming by the fire when the Confederates struck. The North Georgia Scouts, which had joined the Lumpkin County Home Guard for the operation, killed six Federals and captured Ashworth and 19 of his men. They also found lists of prominent Unionists and those who had aided Brown's unit.

On the way to Gainesville, the Rebels picked up the listed collaborators, including George G. Robinson, the sheriff of Dawson County. After delivering the captives to Col. J.J. Findley, Edmondson's troops quickly headed back to Murray County. As for the bluecoats, twelve were executed on November 7, 1864, after a hasty trial in Gainesville. The rest of the captives were sent to various hellholes in the Southern prison system.

On December 15, the Union army officially disbanded the First Georgia Cavalry. Yankee officers were scathing in their assessment of the unit. Descriptions included “utterly worthless,” “heterogeneous trash,” and “cowards, thieves.” The most damning charge was that the unit actually “encourage[d] guerillas by running whenever attacked.”

While Edmondson, Thompson, and the North Georgia Scouts continued their partisan activities throughout the winter of 1864, Lt. Gen. John B. Hood was virtually destroying his Army of Tennessee in a series of rash assaults on the bloody hills near Franklin and Nashville. By New Years Day 1865, the remnant of Hood's army shivered and starved in the northern Mississippi hills. Lieutenant General Richard Taylor, commanding the Rebel armies in Mississippi and northern Alabama, ordered his subordinates to send cattle to Hood's battered army, but none of the regular officers responded to the directive. Finally, Edmondson and John Gatewood, an unlikely ally, would combine forces to help feed the hungry Rebel army.

Modern historians have portrayed John Pemberton Gatewood as a psychotic killer with minimal loyalty to the Confederate cause. It is probably true that he deserted from a Tennessee Confederate cavalry unit to become a bushwhacker intent on avenging the rape and murder of a younger sister by Unionists and the subsequent death of his mother. He arrived in Northwest Georgia during the summer of 1864, after serving a brief apprenticeship with Tennessee guerilla Champ Ferguson. Gatewood's enemies quickly branded him “the redheaded beast of Georgia,” and he began spreading death and terror throughout the region, targeting primarily Unionists and conscript evaders. The redheaded guerilla leader likely first contacted Tom Polk Edmondson when Gatewood's gang traveled through Murray County to attack Yankee sympathizers in Polk County, Tennessee.

On the night of January 4, 1865, Gatewood and Edmondson combined forces to seize a herd of cattle, meant for the Union garrison at Chattanooga, near Lee & Gordon’s Mills in Walker County. The raiders collected a herd of beeves, horses, and mules, variously estimated at between 700 and 2,000 head. The Union guards, numbering nearly 40 men, were killed, generally by having their throats cut.

A squad from the 42nd United States Colored Troops numbering just ten soldiers, hurried south from Chattanooga in an attempt to intercept the guerillas. Armed with single shot rifles, the black troops found themselves confronting 300 partisans, each equipped with three or four Navy Colt pistols, and beat a hasty retreat without firing a shot. The next morning, Maj. George W. Grubbs led “every man…able to march” in the 42nd on a “severe campaign” to run the bushwhackers to ground, but the marching bluecoats had no chance of catching mounted Rebels.

Edmondson returned to Murray County almost immediately after the raid, but Gatewood pushed the stolen herd through McLemore’s Cove, crossed the Coosa River south of Gaylesville, Alabama, and drove the critters to the starving Confederate army in northern Mississippi.

The Motliest Crew

By April 1865, the Federals at Dalton had seen enough of Edmondson's bushwhackers. Lieutenant Colonel Werner W. Bjerg led a force comprised of the 147th Illinois Infantry and the 6th Tennessee Mounted Infantry (USA) from Dalton to Spring Place, where they arrested several Southern sympathizers. The bluecoats then moved south, down the Calhoun Road, to the Coosawattee River.

There, Edmondson and his North Georgia Scouts, reinforced by a few local guerilla units, launched several furious, but ultimately ineffectual attacks on the bluecoats. Late in the afternoon, the young partisan observed Bjerg’s Federals crossing the Coosawattee. Believing that the time had arrived to scatter the disorganized enemy force, Edmondson ordered his troops to charge.

It was a trap. A concealed force of bluecoat soldiers closed in from the east, opening a deadly crossfire on the Southern raiders. Edmondson fell with his face toward the enemy, apparently dead before he hit the ground. Bjerg later reported his losses in the skirmish as three wounded, while he claimed that the Confederate suffered ten dead.

After the Federal force withdrew across the river, the surviving North Georgia Scouts returned to reclaim the body of their commander. They found he had been shot in the face and torso. The Yankees had stripped him of his weapons and even the buttons from his coat. Tom Polk's family buried their youngest son in the family plot at the Spring Place Cemetery. The simple inscription on the tombstone read: “Tom Polk Edmondson. Born August 1844. Killed in Battle, April 3, 1865.”

Edmondson's old unit remained together for a few more weeks, apparently under the command of a Captain Rogers, until after news of the surrender of General Lee's army reached

To read Maurice Thompson’s “A Ballad of a Little Fun,” his poem about Tom Polk Edmondson’s charge into history, visit www.georgiabackroads.com. The poem will be posted at bottom right of the home page until May 31.
North Georgia. Then, on May 12, 1865, Maj. Gen. William T. Wofford surrendered the three to four thousand Confederate troops left under arms in Georgia at Kingston. Some guerillas, including John Gatewood, never surrendered. The initials G. T. [Gone to Texas] carved in a doorpost indicated that a former Rebel had departed for the raw Texas frontier.

Maurice Thompson and his mates from the North Georgia Scouts were promptly paroled at Kingston. One Rebel veteran described the guerilla troop as: "The motliest crew I have ever seen before or since. These so-called scouts were strutting around with broad-brimmed hats, long hair, and jingling spurs."

A Little Fun

Despite their seeming bravado, many of the Scouts were devastated by the surrender. Thompson reported: "I gave her [the South] all—I could do no more. I closed my eyes and longed to die." Ironically, Lt. Col. Bjerg, who led the force that killed Edmondson, was the Union officer who signed Thompson’s parole.

But for Maurice Thompson, Tom Polk Edmondson might have slipped into historical obscurity. The young man returned to his Calhoun home, briefly practicing law in Gordon County. But everything had changed. A Thompson biographer recorded that "his mother was gray and bent with years; his father broken, helpless, poor; himself wounded and sick."

By 1868, Thompson decided to leave the devastated Southland, moving to Crawfordsville, Indiana, where his legal activities quickly took a back seat to a writing career. He gained fame as a "local color" author, often using the people he had known in the Georgia mountains, with their colorful dialect, in his stories. He and his brother Cliff also inspired future generations of longbow archers with their book, *The Wizardry of Archery."

In 1895, *Century Magazine* published a Thompson poem entitled “The Ballad of a Little Fun.” The lyrics, written with a meter that imitates a galloping horse, told of “Jim” Polk Edmondson’s final charge and death (the reason for the name change from Tom to Jim is unknown). The poem struck a chord with readers, and was later as reprinted under the title “The North Georgia Scouts.”

Thompson’s health, always fragile, declined, and he died of pneumonia at age 56 and was buried at Crawfordsville. His final novel, *Alice of Vincennes*, became his most successful work of fiction. Later, Alice was turned into a popular play and a Hollywood film. Today, Thompson is considered one of Indiana’s most notable authors, but he had never forgotten his boyhood in Georgia and his Civil War service with Tom Polk Edmondson and the North Georgia Scouts.

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